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Movie biz ad$ video shorts

By DAVID HINCKLEY

SHORT FILMS have always had a place at the movies, back to the olden days of serials, cartoons and newsreels. By the '50s, however, TV had made a lot of this neat stuff obsolete, and those theaters that still wanted shorts often turned to cheap travel promo flicks like "Beautiful Holland."

This effectively killed the filler business. Now, however, there's a comeback under way, and it is being led, not surprisingly, by the hottest short film subject in years: rock music.

These larger-than-life cousins of TV videos are coming from two sources. The first is Music Motions, whose initial effort is a custom-made video of Carly Simon singing "It Happens Every Day." More or less a prototype project, that video is rented to theaters with the idea that if it becomes popular, the company will expand. It says that it is now negotiating with other artists.

THE SIMON video, first shown in April in Alabama, made its New York debut this month at the Eighth St. Playhouse.

Also arriving this month is a more ambitious project from a Los Angeles-based outfit called the Music Theater Network, which will supply about 700 theaters with four- to five-minute concert clips of "Panama" by Van Halen, "The Reflex" by Duran Duran and "Synchronicity" by the Police. The initial group will include American Multi-Cinema theaters in New Jersey and Long Island, with New York theaters added by early fall.

THESE CLIPS, to be shown between "coming attractions" and the main feature, are not exactly something for nothing. In about half the theaters, says MTN partner Robert Wilson, the music will be followed by a 10- to 15-second commercial for Pierre Cardin, the first of what he says will eventually be about 10 advertisers.

The Police, from left, Stewart Copeland, Sting and Andy Summers: Can they sell suits?

Yes, that's right. There's an ad here. A well-camouflaged, music-coated ad. But an ad nonetheless. Now ads have been common in European theaters for years, but have never gone over well in America, wh[Page 42]trons feel that their $5 admission fee entitles them to freedom from such things.

MTN ads will be better received, says Wilson, because the clip is mainly music and the ads themselves are more subtle ("People will tolerate 15 seconds better than 90"). Still, theater owners have the option of taking the film without the commercial (and paying to run it) or taking it with the commercial (and being paid by MTN). So far, says Wilson, it's about 50-50.

MTN was made possible, says Wilson, by a process whereby video or film shot for a basically square screen (TV) can be enlarged and adapted to a rectangular screen (theater) without looking ridiculous. Also, for marketing purposes, the company has developed a computerized network whereby specific music acts can be matched with specific movies in specific theaters.

That means, for instance, the Police are paired with "Ghostbusters," and Duran Duran with "Gremlins." "You certainly wouldn't put a Van Halen before a 'Terms of Endearment,'" Wilson says. "If we don't have an act that fits the movie, we won't use that movie. We won't put anything with 'The Muppets Take Manhattan,' for instance."

The importance of matchmaking was confirmed, says Wilson, when MTN deliberately showed a Stevie Nicks clip before 'Gandhi' in San Antonio. "The reaction was almost violent. A 55-year-old woman yelled, 'I'm a captive of rock 'n' roll.' But asked if there were artists they'd like to have seen, they said sure, like Willie Nelson."

SOON, says Wilson, Nelson could be available. "We hope to serve all demographics—rock, black, Latino, country. We could have Julio Iglesias or Placido Domingo." More immediate plans, however, call for six more rock acts.

Wilson says he and partner Robert Kardashian figure that about half the country's theaters, about 9,000, would be receptive to MTN services. Truth is, however, this shorts-with-commercials gambit is only a foot in the door. MTN's real goal, and the real money, lie in full-length rock concert films.

AS WILSON envisions it, these films would be made on the road, then shown after the tour was over, with the primary market being places ("like Moline or Biloxi") the band had not reached. Concert merchandise—T-shirts, etc.—would be sold in the theater lobby.

Wilson says that a deal is close with the first act, and while he concedes this will not be the same as seeing a band in person, he quickly adds, "But it's a lot better than seeing it on TV."

Even with a commercial.